Eminem's Still Got It – Sway Tells The Story Behind The Interview

By MTV News Staff
Among the hip-hop purists there is an unspoken code of ethics.

You have to pay your dues, respect the pioneers and be original. Preserve

the art and get paid, but don't sacrifice integrity to do so. Those who

break the code are never respected. They get dissed — they're tagged as

culture vultures.

In the past, through my position in radio ([article id='1453178']click here[/article] for

Sway's bio), I'd been known to spearhead a revolt or two against rappers who

went pop outside of the guidelines of "the code" -- people who were

using hip-hop only to get paid and who weren't giving back or educating the

masses about the true history.

It's more than a decade later now, and oh how ironic it is that I work for

MTV, arguably the biggest catalyst for the commercialization of rap music,

according to hip-hop purists. Nevertheless, I'm sitting outside in a patio

chair on the top floor of the Peninsula Hotel in midtown New York, basting

in the sun, mentally preparing to do one of the biggest interviews of the

year with Eminem.

In many ways Mr. Shady is the embodiment of what MTV is all about. He's a

pop phenomenon, he has the attention and allegiance of millions of youths

across the globe, he's cutting-edge and controversial, he's well versed on

current events, he's hated and loved, and he's always one step ahead of the

game.

This would be a fun interview under normal circumstances, but because of

Eminem's importance the news department gave me five full pages of questions

they want to make sure I ask. And there was the challenge of balancing

everyone else's frantic energy with the job of conducting an interview that

would feel like a casual dialogue between friends. It wasn't easy.

It's about 1:45 in the afternoon and I'm still laid-back in the patio chair.

I began to remember the time I first met Eminem. It was 1997 in Los Angeles.

Hip-hop was in a state of emergency. The East Coast vs. West Coast

propaganda was still prevalent. We had just lost the icon Tupac Shakur to

murder and didn't know that we would soon lose Biggie as well.

I was working on a syndicated radio program called "The Wake-Up Show" with my

partner, King Tech. We were known for finding underground artists and making

them popular in the industry and in the streets worldwide.

A good friend of mine, Wendy Day from Chicago, invited us to her event, the

Rap Olympics, where Eminem, a cat named Juice and a slew of other rappers

were competing in a battle. The scene that night resembled a clip from the

movie "Gladiator," with rapid-fire improv being the weapons. Eminem ranked

with the best that night. His style and voice were unique. He reminded me of

a rapper named Chino XL who was notorious for shocking punch lines.

This arena was home for Eminem because it didn't matter that he was a dope

rapper who happened to be white — what really mattered was that he was

a dope rapper. All that really counts to true MCs is to be respected,

admired and feared because of your lyrical skills. We invited Em up to the

radio show the next night for his final test.

Our show covers 25 markets in the U.S. as well as five countries abroad. We

had the most critical listening audience in the business -- true sharks.

No matter whether you were a platinum artist or an unknown, everybody had to

enter the freestyle battles, and if you were wack the callers would let you

know.

This also made it the most feared show in the business because you could

lose your props and credibility if you didn't do well. Those things have

always been more important than record sales to a true MC, especially if you

live by the unspoken codes of hip-hop. At that time Eminem lived by those

codes. When he first arrived to the show it was a room full of rappers, and he

kind of stood in the back really humbly. There were a few other rappers just

as good as him, all of which had their own style.

He finally stepped to the mic with this look in his eye that showed he was

ready for lyrical warfare. I had never heard melodies like his. I had never

heard someone play with syllables quite like he did. His subject matter was

hair-raising shocking, but funny too. He could go on forever, and he and the

other rappers practically did. The audience loved it, and he passed the

test.

Eminem became a regular on our show, and we played his music all the time.

He eventually signed with Interscope through Dr. Dre's Aftermath label. King

Tech and I also signed with Interscope to do a mixtape/compilation album

called *This or That*. It featured various artists including Eminem,

who came over to our house to record a song called "Get You Mad" exclusively

for our album. It was the hip-hop way of doing things. We looked out for him

unconditionally, so he looked out for us.

As Eminem's career began to explode, I never really followed the controversy

behind it because I only saw it as a gimmick. Especially making a mockery of

all of the pop stars — I knew that he wasn't really from that world, so

why would he care? Then it dawned on me. He had to do that to combat the

demons within because along with all of the success he was slowly becoming

one of them, a pop star. Plus there were all the stories about his

dysfunctional family, drugs, gun charges, divorce, parent protest,

government protest, etc. I wondered if he still lived by "the code."

So here I am, five years later, outside on the roof of the Peninsula Hotel,

sitting in a patio chair about to interview Eminem again. I snapped out of

my reminiscence when I heard producer Darin Byrne say, "He's here."

Em had on a bright-colored velour sweatsuit with a Nike tank top and a

fishing-style Kangol hat on his head, and I was thinking that he still looks

exactly the same. Physically he hadn't changed at all. He slowly greeted the

small number of people on the rooftop, and then he looked at me and said,

"Yo, what up, Sway?" and I was like, "What up!" It felt like a high school

reunion.

We did the hip-hop half-hug, and then I pulled him aside and told him that I

was proud of him for all of his accomplishments. He thanked me very humbly

and asked me what I thought of *The Eminem Show* the album. I told him

that I heard it three times already and that lyrically and skill-wise he has

rocketed to another level. That's when I noticed this spark in his eye.

I asked him, with all of his money and success, why is he so concerned in

his lyrics about getting props as being one of the top rappers of all time?

He looked at me with a familiar look that I saw five years ago when he first

stepped to the mic on my radio show. "Because this is in my blood," he said.

"I'm a true MC to the heart."

Soon after that we started the interview, and it turned out to be a dialog

between old friends. He answered everything about his dysfunctional family,

drugs, gun charges, divorce, parent protest, government protest, etc. It was

deep.

Afterward we talked about our daughters, all of his beefs and other rappers'

beefs and who won what battle until we had to go. It was a good day. I

really learned a lot about the rapper and the person. In closing, in case

you're wondering, Marshall Mathers, a.k.a. Eminem, still lives by the code.

For a full-length feature interview with Eminem, check out [article id='1454585']'Eminem: The Gift And The Curse'[/article].

See Sway's interview on the MTV News Now special "EMerican Made," airing Thursday at 3 p.m. and 11 p.m., Friday at 5 p.m., Saturday at 11 p.m. and Sunday at 8 p.m.

— [article id='1453178']Sway Calloway[/article]